

THE POPE'S CLAIMS TO JURISDICTION

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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Pope Paul's visit is arousing interest and discussion in the newspapers. It is very important that we should examine what is involved and what it is that the Pope stands for.

It is wellknown that protestants regard the Roman Catholic Church in error in many important matters, but it is not so much doctrine as jurisdiction that is the problem in our relationship with the Pope himself. To put it bluntly, the Pope claims to be the dictator of every Christian whether Roman Catholic or not and, of every Christian government as well. He claims that all should behave in the way that he tells them, even in details and he continues to enforce this claim by every means at his disposal. This is based on the claim that the Pope is Christ's vicegerant. That he is Christ's deputy. It was this that was the fundamental dispute of the Reformation, this papal claim to exercise jurisdiction over the minds and consciences of all Christian people as well as all Christian governments. The claim is still being made and acted on. The first Vatican Council made it clear that the Roman Church believes that Christ gave Peter "true and proper jurisdiction" over Christians and "that the Pope of Rome is the successor of Peter in this jurisdiction", so that "the Pope has a full and supreme power over the universal church, not only in things which belong to faith and morals but also those related to the discipline and government of the church spread throughout the world....this power is ordinary

and immediate....over all the pastors and the faithful". (L. Ott. Catholic Dogmas 283ff). The present Pope has not let this power of jurisdiction sink into the background; for example he asserted his claims to supreme jurisdiction over every Christian conscience when he visited the World Council of Churches in Geneva and told them "my name is Peter". Although protestant Christians reject the claim, the Pope has not diminished in any way his claim to exercise jurisdiction over them. It follows that his view of Christian unity is submission to the Pope's jurisdiction, that is, obedience in what he says we must do, whether in marriage or in anything else. Pope Boniface VIII made it clear in the bull Unum Sanctum in the most solemn words, "it is necessary for every person, without exception, to be subject to the Roman pontiff if they are to be saved," and this has been re-iterated by Roman Catholic councils constantly.

For a Christian who believes that Christian unity is something very different from submission to the Papal jurisdiction it is anomolous, not to say hypocritical, to pray with the Pope at his invitation, for Christian unity. To pray for Christian unity at a Roman Catholic service led by the Pope is a tacit acknowledgement that the worshipper goes along with what is being prayed for and it seems quite impossible for a protestant Christian who is aware of the situation to agree to being placed in this false light.



Nowadays, the Papal claim to infallibility overshadows in our imagination the claim to jurisdiction for it seems preposterous that anyone should claim to be infallible, so that we forget the more fateful claim is jurisdiction. However, the claim to infallibility is a recent dogma, only dating from 1870, and is somewhat fanciful. It has been exercised very seldom and with regard to such abstruse matters as to whether the virgin Mary was born without original sin or whether she has been resurrected to heaven, questions which are not closely related to real life nor verifiable in experience. But the claim to jurisdiction over the consciences of the Christians, that is that they must behave in the way the Pope tells them to is a very different matter. It is a claim that goes back well before the Reformation and was indeed the underlying controversy of the Reformation and it is being vigorously and constantly acted on by the Pope at present. At the time of the Reformation, the Church of England denounced this doctrine as tyranny, for it is a one man dictatorship over conscience and in its effects it is not a benign dictatorship, but a painful one. The Presbyterian Church in its Westminster Confession describes the Pope, for this same claim to exercise jurisdiction over Christian consciences as "The man of sin and son of perdition!" But although in these days we do not use these terms, being more polite, the facts which gave rise to them have not changed. The Pope is still a dictator over Christian consciences and

his dictatorship is painful; that is, cruel in its effect on the lives of many people, although he himself may be sincere and well-meaning. For it is not the man but the office and its administration to which Protestants object.

Let us look at two recent instances of this tyrannous dictatorship by Pope Paul VI. In his encyclical about contraceptives he affirmed that the contraceptive pill is never to be used under any circumstances. Thus he invades the lives of married couples in a way that Christ has given him no right to do and he prevents them from using their judgement as to what is best for their family life, and he inflicts, in my opinion, a great deal of suffering as a consequence. In this decision about contraceptives the Pope acted on his own, against the advice of a strong and well informed committee, which he himself had appointed to look into the matter. Is any other term but dictatorship suitable for this? And a cruel dictatorship at that, involving a great deal of distress to those who submit to his jurisdiction. Though well meaning, it does not make it less cruel. What is this but tyranny, old fashioned though the term is.

Or take another current illustration. In spite of the wishes of a very large number of Roman Catholic priests the Pope continues to forbid them to get married, subjecting them to all sorts of strains and depriving them of the possibility of the fellowship of



marriage which God has created for us. The whole Roman Catholic Church in Holland with its bishops and clergy petitioned the Pope that the Roman Catholic clergy should be allowed to marry and have a family life, but Pope Paul VI has forbidden it. In this way he claims a jurisdiction over the private lives of Christians which he has no right to claim and he exercises it in the name of Jesus Christ.

Neither the Pope's decisions about contraceptives or priestly celibacy is said to be infallible and it is confidently predicted that they will be altered in the future. Meanwhile many people are kept in distressing situations merely by papal authority and not by the truth of the arguments which support the decisions.

How can protestant Christians who are in relationship with Jesus Christ through His Spirit approve of this jurisdiction or condone it by their presence? It is a jurisdiction which their forefathers threw off at tremendous cost of blood and tears.

There is another aspect of the papal jurisdiction which is not very prominent today though it is still maintained and may well be exercised in the future, and that is, the Pope's claim that governments must be subject to him and do as he directs. This claim cost a lot of Roman Catholics their lives in the reign of Elizabeth I, when the Pope deposed the Queen and called upon all her subjects to rebel

against her. In this way many Englishmen were brought to death, for those who were caught were naturally executed by the English government, as traitors, and only this month the present Pope proposes to canonize them, showing that he does not regard their action as being misguided or the claim a dead letter that the government should obey the Pope or else be deposed, which involved them in those fatal consequences.

The old fashioned term for this claim of the Pope is "usurpation", because protestants believe that it is a claim that has no basis in holy scripture nor known in the early church. It was during the middle ages the Popes advanced this claim more and more, largely on the basis of forged documents, such as the False Decretals and the Donation of Constantine. But it is not possible to advance one's authority illegitimately without encroaching on the authority of others and in this case the Pope's authority over the consciences of Christians is exercised at the expense of the Holy Spirit's authority, because the way that Christ exercises His Lordship among His people is not through the external authority of the Bishop of Rome but through His own presence in the minds and hearts of His children through the Holy Spirit.

The Papal authority, as we have seen, is a harsh external authority, cruel in its effects, however well-meaning an individual Pope may be.



But the authority that Christ exercises is very different. It is a suasive authority gladly followed because the Holy Spirit teaches us to love the thing which God commands in His word and shows us what that word means for our lives.

We who are protestants should thank God for the faithfulness of our predecessors who rejected at great cost to themselves the harsh external authority of the Pope over our consciences and who have made it possible for us to read God's word in the Bible freely. We should read that word and allow it to rule our consciences as we have fellowship with God through prayer. Let us be on our guard that Satan does not tempt us to sit lightly by this privilege, and draw us away from the possibility of fellowship with our heavenly Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, but rather, be regular in Bible reading and prayer, gladly obeying the word of Christ which the Holy Spirit lays on our heart as we read and hear that word in holy scripture. Christ calls us to liberty from external authority in order that we might submit ourselves freely to doing his will as He reveals it to our minds and consciences as we prayerfully read His word.

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